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ABSTRACT

This research examined the relationship between effective school-community relations and student achievement. The purpose of the study was to determine how the five variables of access, communication, involvement, participation, and resolution interact with a measure of effective school-community relations, how the five variables related to measures of student achievement, and how the variable of access relates to the other four variables. Sixty-four parents of students in grades four through six were interviewed for their perceptions of the effectiveness of one of the five variables. Statistical techniques used included the Pearson product moment correlations, forward step-wise regression, and path analysis. The findings suggest that communication is the most important variable of an effective school-community relations program. The study suggests that teachers be trained to use parent conferences and other interaction opportunities as two-way communication vehicles. Also, information sent to parents should contain a tear-off section for them to fill out and return with their comments. (Author/LD)

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PERSPECTIVES ON SCHOOL-COMMUNITY RELATIONS

SCHOOL COMMUNITY RELATIONS and STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

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SCHOOL COMMUNITY RELATIONS
and
STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

by John E. Ingram, Jr.

A large body of literature indicates that a major factor of student achievement and motivation for achievement comes from the student's home environment (Lansberger, 1975; Karnes and Zehrbach, 1975; Eells, 1974). At the same time, the school plays a vital role in the cognitive and affective development of the student. The focus of the student curriculum, the mode of teacher behavior and attitude, and the classroom environment greatly influence the educational program and its outcomes. Any program of sound educational planning needs to consider both the home and the school.

To promote parental involvement, educators point to numerous activities in which parents can engage. These activities include: a) volunteer activities; b) parent education and c) parent tutoring (Adkins, 1975; Nelson and Bloom, 1973).

Recently, the focus of parent involvement activities has centered on parents working as tutors. That is, parents are being encouraged to work directly with their children at home to reinforce the educational skills being introduced at school to increase student achievement (Rich and Jones, 1977; Stearns and Peterson, 1973). The value of parent tutoring is not being questioned in this paper. However, significant, yet tentative findings of the Home-School-Community Relations Project at the Wisconsin Research and Development Center are presented here to examine another perspective. While much time, energy, and money is being expended to encourage various forms of parental involvement, particularly, parent tutoring, the Home-School-Community Relations Project has attempted to focus on various processes that appear to be an integral part of any systematic approach to strengthening the relationship between the home and the school.

As a part of the project's task, Bowles and Fruth developed a set of ten assumptions that underlie a complete program of school-community relations. These assumptions are:

1. Home-school-community relations involves much more than the effective use of media. Communications media are definitely a part of a successful program, but their use should not be the total program.

2. The benefits of any instructional or organizational change must be made visible and tangible to the various subpublics in the school community. Thus, members of school subpublics must be involved early in implementation efforts and answers to questions must be in concrete, specific, and understandable terms.

3. An effective program of home-school-community relations involves working very closely with parents. This includes parent volunteers, home-school visits, and parent participation in educational decision making.

4. School staff members should use the educational resources available in the community. This action will both enhance the instructional program and increase the staff's knowledge of the community.

5. Members of the school staff must expand their concept of community. Educational affairs should not be considered in isolation from community affairs and municipal issues.

6. Students are the most important subpublic in a school. They are a primary source of information for their parents, they affect the way that their parents and other adults respond, and the way they perceive their education now will influence their view of schools when they are adults.

7. The relationship between the home, school, and community should be continuous and on-going. Crisis-management should be avoided as a program is easier to build and maintain during times of tranquility than in times of torment.

8. Home-school-community relations is not equivalent with an advisory committee. While community advisory committees, ad hoc parental committees, and study groups are good strategies, they are but one part of a complete program.

9. Many diverse subpublics are now showing an increased interest in the schools. Provision should be made to insure adequate communication, to increase their involvement in school activities, to provide for participation in educational decision making, and to develop ways to resolve actual or potential conflict among them, the school, and the home.

10. Educators do not hold a monopoly on the expertise about educational philosophy, policy, and practices. School community subpublics are better informed, more knowledgeable, and more sophisticated than in the past.

These ten assumptions suggest than an effective program of school-community relations should consist of two-way communication which utilizes more than memos or newsletters. The program should

be on-going and geared to meet the needs of all of the school's subpublics. Finally, all members of school's community including teachers, parents, students, former students, senior citizens, and non parents should be involved in the school-community relations program.

With the above mentioned assumptions serving as a backdrop for further exploration, a research study was designed to focus on the relationship between effective school-community relations and student achievement. The five processes examined in this research were access, communication, involvement, participation, and resolution. The definitions of these processes might prove helpful to the reader in that an examination of the literature on school-community relations indicates that some conceptual confusion exists.

School-community relations for the purpose of this paper is defined as a systematic approach for using social science principles to promote positive interactions among the home, the school, and the community.

Access is defined as a process which assures various community subpublics that they are able to have their interests represented in the school (Iannaccone, 1977; Mann, 1976; Pitkin, 1967).

Communication is a process which utilizes various forms of interaction among the school's subpublics and between the school and the subpublics. The mainstream of communication

research has tended to indicate that the school stresses the promotion of what it is doing through the use of one-way communication (Carter and Chaffee, 1966; Atkinson, 1971).

Involvement is a process through which various subpublics contribute resources of time, energy, and expertise to the school. (The Home-School-Community Relations Project attempts to make a clear distinction between involvement and participation.) The major thrust of the literature on involvement stresses its utility to influence the lay public into supporting the institution and into providing additional resources to the instructional program of the school (Mann, 1976; Conant, 1971, Carter and Dapper, 1972; Murray, 1974).

Participation is defined as a process which provides a vehicle to the decision and policy making structures of the school. The literature on participation stresses that parent participation will promote a partnership between the parents and the school. This partnership will bring about an alignment of the educational expectations of the parents with those of the school. It is suggested that parent participation will generate increased support for the schools (Arnstein, 1971; Liechty, 1976; Lahoda, 1971).

Resolution is a process designed to solve problems and to reduce actual or potential conflict among the home, the school, and the community. The bulk of literature concerning conflict

resolution suggested that educational leaders should be politically astute and should act as harmonizers between the home, the school, and the community (Bowles and Fruth, 1976; Turner, 1970; Carter, 1975).

Utilizing the aforementioned processes, a research study was designed to examine the relationship between effective school-community relations and student achievement. An interview protocol was developed which gathered the perceptions of sixty-four parents of students in grades four-six regarding effective school-community relations using the five variables of access, communication, involvement, participation, and resolution as measures of same.

The focused interview protocol consisted of one overall question measuring parents' perceptions of the effectiveness of school-community relations and five specific questions. Each of the specific questions measured parents' perceptions of the effectiveness of one of the five variables of access, communication, involvement, participation, and resolution. Each of these questions was measured using a 5-point Likert type scale. The interview protocol also contained an open ended question for each of the five variables and items to serve as probes. The probes were constructed to elicit responses from the interviewee if voluntary responses proved to be lacking in depth.

Also, incorporated into the research was a description of the school-community relations program at the inner-city school serving a population of 628 Black students. This description examined the activities of the school in terms of the five processes. The school carried on a wide variety of activities which involved staff, students, parents, former students, and senior citizens. A warm, friendly atmosphere prevailed at the school. Teacher aides served as vital communication links between the school and the community. Other non-teacher staff members contributed significantly to the general open-door policy of the school.

The telephone provided the most widely used method of communication. Many parents volunteered their time and made donations. Participation activities for parents revolved around three committees; namely, Title I Parent Advisory Committee, Follow Through Parent Advisory Committee, and Reading With Understanding Parent Advisory Committee. However, parents made few significant contributions toward the formulation of policy. Resolution was handled in a friendly manner usually concerning individual problems. Most parents felt that they made significant contributions toward problem solving by having many of their suggestions adopted by school personnel. Access was gained through the principal; although, parents seldom availed themselves of this perceived entree to the school.

Data for the study were collected utilizing field methodology. The specific purposes of the study were to determine:

1) How the five variables of access, communication, involvement, participation, and resolution interact with a measure of effective school-community relations.

2) How the five variables relate to measures of student achievement.

3) How the variable of access relates to the other four variables.

Three statistical techniques were utilized in the study; namely, Pearson product moment correlations, forward step-wise regression, and path analysis.

Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients, which indicated the degree to which variation or change in one variable was related to variation or change in another variable, were used a) to determine the relationships among the five variables in school-community relations, and b) to determine the relationship between effective school-community relations and student achievement.

Forward step-wise multiple regression analysis was also utilized to analyze the data. In this procedure the variable that explained the greatest amount of variance in the dependent variable was entered first; the variable that explained the

greatest amount of variance in conjunction with the first was entered second, and so on. This procedure was used a) to determine the strength of the relationships among the four independent variables (communication, involvement, participation, and resolution) to the dependent variable of access; b) to determine the strength of the relationships among the five independent variables and the dependent variable of effective school-community relations; and c) to determine the strength of the relationships among the five independent variables and the dependent variable of student achievement.

In order for the procedure to be validly applied, both the theoretical formulations of causal relationships within the program and any associated assumptions were made explicit. Path analysis then provided a means of empirically testing the tenability and consistency of the assumed relationships. It forced a sharpening and testing of both the logical and empirical basis underlying programmatic causal claims.[1]

The analysis of the data resulted in findings that appeared to be significant for both practitioners and researchers.

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1. Preliminary analysis of the data collected indicated that resolution might be an important variable and predicted a large amount of the variance explained of student achievement. Therefore, plausible causal linkages were postulated among the variables with resolution serving as an intervening variable, and a secondary analysis of the data was performed.

As a process, communication explained 49% of the variance accounted for of effective school-community relations. The process of resolution explained from 8% to 18% of the variance accounted for of the eight measures of student achievement, namely Iowa Basic Skills achievement test scores and grades for reading, language, mathematics, and cumulative. Path analysis was utilized to confirm the tentative findings and suggested that resolution served as an intervening variable which mediated the effects of the remaining four variables on the measures of student achievement. Parent perceptions of effective school-community relations were only significantly correlated with language grades and cumulative grades.

Interpretation of the above findings suggests that communication was the most important variable of an effective school-community relations program. Thus, practitioners should consider communicating with the school's subpublics by using a wide variety of mechanisms that incorporate one-way and two-way communication. Training might be provided for teachers that would help them to use parent conferences and other interaction opportunities as a two-way communication vehicle rather than occasions where information is given to parents but none is returned to the teacher. Also, information sent to parents might be constructed so that a tear-off section is included which parents could return to school with a comment.

Although no single school-community relations activity showed a positive impact on student achievement, the data clearly indicated that the process of resolution impacted positively on student achievement. The findings of the study suggested that group concerns, such as, an unsatisfactory teacher or a student dress code, were seldom present at the school. Most of the concerns of parents were expressed as individual problems that involved a particular child. The types of concerns raised included questions about the assignment of students to a particular teacher, the best methods of discipline to be used, and whether a child's seat should be moved to another part of the classroom. Parents viewed themselves as playing a meaningful role in solving such problems because staff members sought their opinions and often utilized them. This finding should lead practitioners to be more sensitive to the need for participatory problem solvng in as many situations involving children's problems as possible.

It seems clear that the resolution of conflict takes place best in a non-crisis atmosphere. A trust level must be established prior to dealing with conflict resolution, if at all possible. There is little time to engage in building trust and creating a warm, friendly, atmosphere when a crisis is at hand. At that point, you either have it or you do not have it.

Problems or concerns at the research site were handled in a low-keyed, friendly atmosphere which reflected the leadership style of the principal. Parents were often consulted and their advice taken in dealing with such situations. Therefore, parents perceived themselves as having a direct affect in settling differences of opinion and avoiding conflict.

It appears that in-service training sessions for the entire staff of a school on the art of cooperative problem solving would prove of great value. This would enable a staff to focus attention on how to identify potential conflict situations and how to promote viable and tangible solutions that include parents in the problem solving process.

Generally, the literature on the relationship between effective school-community relations and student achievement showed a positive relationship. More specifically, effective school-community relations programs related directly with the principal's leadership style and his/her political savvy and effective program management. Staff attitudes on relating to the community were very important along with operating in a non crisis atmosphere. The conflict management skills and resources of the principal and the staff were central to an effective school-community relations program.

Effective school-community relations programs appeared to have little relationship with socio-economic factors of the school, past experience in implementing an effective school-community relations program, unusual allocation of resources,

or specialization in media or public relations skills.

The conclusions should be considered with respect to the development of literature in the field of school-community relations in future research. Also, researchers should be mindful of lack of systematic investigation beyond the pre-school level where parent involvement has been determined to have a positive effect on student achievement.

Currently, two research efforts are being conducted by the Home-School-Community Relations Project which replicate this study. One of the studies replicates exactly all of the methodology except that it is being conducted in a different socio-economic environment. The other study is examining the interactions of the variables at the junior high and high school level.

Based on the findings of these two studies, a national verification study might be undertaken to strengthen the tentative findings of the project to date. The scope of this research might provide solid findings that would allow greater generalizations to be postulated. Also, the national study might be of great value to practitioners who could apply the research findings to local school site operations.

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